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**Beyond tick-box transitions? Experiences of autistic students moving from special
to further education**

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Abstract

This paper reports on a qualitative, longitudinal case study conducted in England that explored the transition experiences of autistic students with intellectual disabilities (ID) as they left special school to go to colleges of further education (FE). Sequential interviews with six young people, their parents/carers and educators were developed to address an important knowledge gap in relation to progression to post-16 education for differently abled learners. Transition is theorised through both the lens of the social model of disability and the three typologies of *induction*, *development* and *becoming*. Combining these enables a focus on flexible systems and adaptive environments as well as an openness to the variability of autistic students.

While the research found evidence of transition planning, it also identified gaps in critical processes, limited understanding of autistic students' capacity to manage change and normative expectations around independence. Parents reported a largely 'tick-box' approach to transition that was further reflected in a lack of preparation for social transition. The paper highlights responsibilities of institutions to make adaptations to transition processes in order to enable autistic students to better navigate change.

Keywords: transition, autism, further education, special school, intellectual disability, social model

Introduction

This paper reports on a qualitative, longitudinal case study conducted in England that explored the transition experiences of autistic students with intellectual disabilities (ID) as they left special school to go to colleges of further education (FE). Previous research suggests that educational transitions are challenging and potentially destabilising for all children (Evangelou et al. 2008; Humphrey and Ainscow 2006; Zeedyk et al. 2003) with the transition experiences of autistic students being even more so. The ‘Finished at School’ Report, which explored post-16 options for autistic young people, claimed that ‘less than 1 in 4 young people with autism continue their education beyond school’ (Ambitious About Autism 2011, 8) furthermore, the post-16 transition of young adults with intellectual disabilities remains under researched (Carroll 2014). Much of the existing research focuses on the transition from primary to secondary phases of education (Makin et al. 2017; Nuske et al. 2018;) with only a few small-scale studies attending to the specific issues for autistic children (Fortuna 2014; Neal and Frederickson 2016). There is a paucity of research into post-16 transitions to college for any cohorts (Aston et al. 2005; Carroll and Dockrell 2010) and this paper addresses the particular gap in research evidence for autistic students with intellectual disabilities who leave special school settings to move on to mainstream colleges of further education (Chown and Beavan 2012; Polat et al. 2001). In this paper transition is theorised through both the lens of both the social model of disability and the three typologies of *induction*, *development* and *becoming*. This affords a richer exploration of perspectives on the transition process and on the ways in which institutions might make appropriate adaptations.

The social model of disability (Oliver 1983) draws attention to the educational structures and normalising expectations of schools and colleges as they prepare autistic students for transition to college. As Oliver (1996, 32) notes:

‘It is not individual limitations, of whatever kind, which are the cause of the problem, but society’s failure to provide appropriate services and adequately ensure the needs of disabled people are fully taken into account’.

Used in the context of this research, the social model highlights the responsibility of colleges to adapt and accommodate *for* their autistic students, shifting the burden away from the individual adapting *to* the college. However, rigid adherence to the social model alone can deny the validity of the individual experiences as it can risk minimising the impairments of autism and intellectual disabilities by emphasising social barriers as the cause of disablement (Thomas 2004). This makes further theorisation of the concept of transition beneficial in this case through the addition of a framework initially applied to the higher education (HE) context (Gale and Parker 2014). This focuses on the capability to navigate change (735) and identifies three permeable categories: induction, development and becoming (Gale and Parker 2014, 735). In this paper, these have been applied, for the first time, to the context of further education (FE) and the transition experiences of autistic students with ID in England. The category of ***induction*** is used to explore institutional preparation for transition, including how schools and colleges develop transition plans based on their statutory obligations and their expectations that students can be prepared to fit the new learning context. The category of ***development*** focuses more on the ‘trajectory’ of young people as they progress through adolescence towards a more mature identity – in this case as a college student. This has been used to challenge normative assumptions of linear

processes across ages and stages of adolescence through to adulthood. The final category of transition as *becoming* is a much broader concept and allows for a recognition of diversity in student capabilities and an invitation to explore their lived experiences in order to inform policy, practice and institutional behaviours. Gale and Parker (2014) argue that transition as *becoming* should take account of teaching practices, curriculum and institutions themselves in order to value and affirm students' cultural capital as 'the normative and universal discourses of transition do not capture the diversity of student lives' (745). The use of this final categorisation enables a deeper, more nuanced exploration of the complexity of transitions for autistic students.

Autism, transition and the capability to navigate change

The definition of transition proposed by Gale and Parker (2014 737), as 'the capability to navigate change' is particularly powerful when juxtaposed with the diagnostic criteria for autism. The most widely used manual for clinical diagnostic criteria for autism, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), still frames autism within a deficit model. To secure a diagnosis there must be 'impairments' in social communication and interaction as well as, in criterion B2, the manifestation of restricted behaviour patterns:

Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns or verbal nonverbal behavior (e.g., extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns...) (APA 2013, 50)

The *capability to navigate change* is thus already flagged as problematic at the diagnostic stage. Previous research has identified that autistic young people are likely to struggle with the mental flexibility needed to quickly move from one task to another or to adapt to a new situation and to have difficulties in organising their own learning

(Sterling-Turner and Jordan 2007). Transition is also highly likely to increase anxiety levels and render autistic students more vulnerable to difficulties (Hume 2008; Makin et al. 2017; Neal and Frederickson 2016; Nuske et al. 2018), particularly in adolescence where there are increased social demands (Bellini 2006). This includes specific triggers for anxiety such as ‘fearful anticipation’ and interactions with others, both of which feature significantly during transition (Trembath et al. 2012, 216).

Diagnosis and labelling, however, do not illuminate the whole picture of autism, explain individual experiences or identify potential capabilities of autistic people (Chown and Beavan 2012). Diagnosis, as a medical approach, leads to a focus on behaviours and deficits manifested, rather than the social model approach of exploring interactions of autistic people with the neurotypical world (Milton 2013; Williams 1996). For example, Milton, (2012, 10) apportiones the responsibility for ‘deficit’ to both autistic and non-autistic people because ‘it is both that have a problem in terms of empathising with each other: a ‘double empathy problem’’. When considering autistic experiences and the neurotypical responses, specifically the inflexibility of educational institutions around their systems and processes, this is a helpful concept. This is particularly evident in cases where transition planning is little more than a manual of expected behaviours in a new institution or, as described by several parents, a ‘tick-box’ exercise. Rather than the bureaucratic processes of transition plans and travel training certificates, a more reciprocal understanding of the diversity of autistic students would better address their transition trajectories.

Inherent difficulties with social and communication skills have been identified in various studies for autistic students in transition (Humphrey and Ainscow 2006; Polat

et al. 2001). Being bullied, having difficulties with peers and fewer friendships (Hebron and Humphrey 2014; Maras and Aveling 2006) all negatively impact on autistic students' *capability to navigate change*. Small et al. (2013) and Polat (2001) found that most of the young people with intellectual disabilities in their research had limited social networks and seldom accessed leisure activities. Small et al. (2013) also found that while those at special school were even more socially isolated, the significance of friendships was not given much attention during transition planning.

Existing research on autism and transition from primary to secondary school rarely theorises the concept of transition itself (Fortuna 2014; Mandy et al. 2016; Neal and Frederickson 2016; Zeedyk et al. 2003). In some literature children and young people are prepared to 'fit' the new environment where there tends to be a focus on visits, visual supports and guidebooks or 'bridging materials' (Evangelou et al. 2008; Neal and Frederickson 2016; Nuske et al. 2018). There are also examples of adaptations to the physical environment such as designating quiet spaces or separate units (Makin et al. 2017; Maras and Aveling 2006). This approach exemplifies 'tick-box' transitions as it focuses on transition as *induction* or 'pathways of inculcation' (Gale and Parker 2014, 737). Nonetheless, for autistic students there can be a need for explicit and literal teaching of systems and structures (Breakey 2006; Hume et al. 2014) making *induction* a necessary part of the transition process. However, *induction* alone does not address individual differences, the diversity of autistic adolescents and the more holistic and structural changes that might be required.

Trajectories through adolescence towards a more independent adulthood vary across student populations. There are also increased expectations for young people to

assimilate independent ‘college student’ identities as highlighted in the transition as *development* typology (Gale and Parker 2014). In contrast, restricted peer groups, intellectual disabilities and living at a distance from school can all lead autistic young people to experience increased dependence on parents through adolescence (Bauminger and Kasari 2000; Howlin et al. 2004; Orsmond and Kuo 2011). Indeed, Hume et al. (2014, 110) argue that ‘the challenges and difficulties of many adolescents with autism in becoming independent is nearly as much of a marker of autism as is the more traditional diagnostic markers of social competence, communication and repetitive behavior’. Normative expectations of adolescence and independence by educational institutions can marginalise the lived experiences of autistic adolescents with parents seen both as critical to support positive transitions (Lithari and Rogers 2017) but also as over-anxious and inhibiting progress towards independence (Hume et al. 2014).

Gale and Parker (2014), argue that there needs to be a greater focus on transition as *becoming* as there is too little recognition of the fluidity, fragmentation and precarity of transition as an ongoing process and experience. While some research recognises that transition for autistic students is not always a time of crisis and that some students have positive experiences (Dann 2011; Mandy, 2016; Neal and Frederickson 2016), other research identifies the importance of personalising support according to students’ profiles of strengths and difficulties (Fortuna 2014; Kaehne and Beyer 2014). Mitchell (1999, 766) advocates a ‘more flexible perception of transition, one which acknowledges gradual changes within the life course’ and that more lengthy transition processes are sometimes required. Dyson et al. (2002) have also argued that these more fractured transitions require the attention and support of professionals to limit the ‘turbulence’ experienced by young people.

Methodology

The research adopted a qualitative longitudinal approach with the data explored here constituting only part of a larger, but nevertheless small scale, study. This approach facilitated understandings of the complexity of transition for autistic young people as they navigated change at the age of 16. While this period of transition can only be arbitrarily bounded, the research took place over a 12 month period from May through to the following April, during which six young people with autism and ID) moved from three special schools and embarked on their first year at five different mainstream FE colleges in England. All students had statements of Special Educational Needs (SEN) (more recently known as Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plans) meaning that they had required significant additional support at school and were working at an academic level below that of their peers. They were leaving small special schools, with a maximum of 250 students, to go to large colleges, with a minimum of 5000 students. They progressed to a range of courses and qualification levels according to their prior attainment but also, according to the level of social support they required at college. (see Table 1).

[Insert Table 1 near here]

The young people were selected via a recruitment process that involved three special schools located in three local authorities, allowing access to diverse approaches to transition planning. Data were collected primarily at two key points: the final term at school and the second term at college. While the focus was on understanding the young people's experiences, additional data were collected from 40 interviews with parents, teachers, careers advisers and college tutors as well as from documentary and observational evidence. Parents drew on their caring role for their children to

illuminate aspects of their children's experiences (Kittay 2009) and perspectives of teachers, college tutors and careers advisers were sought to enhance understanding of the educational transition process.

It would be impossible to explore the transition experiences of the young people in this research without reference to the ontological reality of their likely difficulties with social interaction and understanding. The methods developed were designed to move away from a deficit model of autism to privilege autistic students' experience of transition as few studies incorporate their perspectives (Pitt et al. 2019; Nind and Vinha, 2013). Methods therefore included a variety of approaches including 'interrupted interviews' with the young people (Shepherd 2015) to take account of their potential antipathy towards intense face-to-face interviews with a relative stranger (the researcher). Tablet technology was used to scaffold the interviews and included: constructing collages of the young people's strengths and interests; card-sorting activities to explore concerns and hopes about going to college (Clark and Moss 2011; Preece 2002), and walking interviews in new college settings (Clark and Emmel 2010).

Ethical considerations for vulnerable participants are critical and respect for the participants informed every stage of the research process ensuring accessibility of research instruments and adapting consent materials (Alderson 2004). Confidentiality and anonymity were assured within the usual limits of risk (Alderson and Morrow 2011) and the names of all the participants were changed with the young people being offered the chance to choose their favoured pseudonym.

All data were recorded, transcribed and analysed, initially through manual coding, and later using Nvivo software to facilitate iterative and reflexive combing through data to links across codes to form substantial themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). The data were analysed in relation to the social model of disability and with reference to Gale and Parker's (2014) transition typology of *induction*, *development* and *becoming* and '*the capability to navigate change*'. While generalisations cannot be made from these data they do provide detailed, illustrative accounts of transition experiences from multiple perspectives, including those of autistic students thus addressing a knowledge gap.

Research findings

Analysis of interviews with students, parent/carers and educators consistently indicated that much work was going on in terms of *induction* - preparing for institutional expectations of the new setting. However, in relation to the *development* category, there was little evidence of questioning of the appropriateness of normative expectations of adolescent trajectories. Broader understandings of transition as a process of *becoming* also appeared to be largely absent from the research data. Rather, participants' accounts were consistent with a 'tick-box' approach, with little focus on institutional adaptation, on preparation for social transition and on understanding autism. Consequently, transition planning was largely unresponsive to the diversity of lives of these young people, the lived realities of their experiences and their varied capabilities.

Transition as induction

The dominance of a 'tick-box' approach to transitions emerged from the significant evidence of planning and preparation for the young person for them to be college-ready: 'we're looking at young people being prepared for moving on' (Careers Adviser,

David's school). Teachers, parents, careers advisers and young people were engaged in the transition process from Year 9 (age 14) and students were invited to attend annual reviews and take part in visits to college.

While Careers Advisers emerged as central to this approach to transition planning, as they could offer up-to-date information, advice and guidance, their involvement was limited both in terms of their understanding of autism and in the resources they had to address the needs of these young people. Careers Advisers were invited to attend annual reviews in Years 9, 10 and 11 and followed through to one phone call in the first term at college. Their focus appeared to be centred on academic progression (see Kaehne and Beyer 2014) rather than considering the wider needs and capabilities of the student and their knowledge of autism was quite limited. For example, one careers adviser had limited understanding of the sensory issues experienced by one young person, commenting:

The first thing he said to me was 'it smells in here' you know which actually was really quite rude (Careers Adviser, Frankie's school).

Limited understandings were also reflected in transition plans that constructed autism as a deficit and located the difficulties within the individual. For example, Jake's transition plan made reference to social difficulties in need of correction, but made no provision for how this might be addressed:

Jake has experienced a few difficulties with friendships this year, mainly due to his rigidity of thought. He has been willing to talk about his mistakes and is willing to try hard to learn about them (Jake's transition plan).

These examples suggest an individualised, medical model approach that deflects responsibility away from the college, underplaying the need to make adjustments to the social environment in order to accommodate the needs of young people such as Jake.

That person-centred planning was not specifically referred to by any of the participants is perhaps not that surprising as encounters with unfamiliar adults could be difficult for young people in the study. David's mother commented on how his 'monosyllabic' responses, often closed down conversations:

Whatever the situation he will always be 'fine' because that's the response he's learnt. Everything's yes and no, it's all very short, it might not even be what he thinks but it's an appropriate answer to the question (David's mother pre-transition).

This shows that the communication needs and preferences of autistic students must be taken into account, and corresponding adjustments made within the transition planning process. David's mother also identified that standardised procedures do not fit every autistic young person,

I think every person is an individual and the way their autism affects them is very different from one child to the next and I think you can't just put them in a box and say tick a form cos it's just not going to work (David's mother pre-transition).

Although there were orientation visits to local colleges, the frequency and intensity of these varied. This appeared to relate less to the needs and preferences of the student and more to the strengths of the links the school had with the colleges. For example, Beth wanted to attend a college that was closer to her home but further away from school, where the school had fewer links. Her visits were fragmented and described as

unsatisfactory by her mother who had to take her there. Beth talked about her anxiety in starting at college,

The thing I'm a bit worried about is apparently the media class, they have to change classes all the time or something but hopefully there will be someone there who...helps anyone with disabilities or something...I'll definitely want that at least for the first ...because otherwise I'll be very lost (Beth, pre-transition).

Frankie, by contrast, was able to attend his chosen college weekly, and follow an accredited course, for a year before starting there. This not only facilitated his academic transition but also meant that he experienced all aspects of college life, including social and eating areas. This helped to support his social transition as he explained:

I met quite a few friends... I like had some friends in my class (Frankie, pre-transition).

His experience demonstrates how transition planning can develop from a tick-box exercise or *induction* approach into a more holistic experience.

An institutional focus on transition as *induction* contributed to an absence of support over the summer holiday period. This was in part because of the way that transition was fragmented into two discrete time periods: leaving school in the summer term and starting at college in the autumn term. All six had been geographically as well as institutionally separated from their peer groups while at special school, and so had limited access to an independent social life. Summer holidays were a time of minimal contact with school or college, and this was highlighted by parents as a significant

concern. Jake's mother commented: 'It's a void, we've got to sort of make it up.'

David's mother worried that the summer holidays were going to be 'quite a big gap to fill' for her son and she felt that he became depressed over the course of the holidays.

Frankie talked about his restricted summer holiday activities,

...just been on my computer all the time... I prefer to go out and do something

(Frankie, during summer holidays)

This disconnect in transition preparation meant a three month 'void' that was not attended to in any transition plan for young people in the sample, adding to social isolation for both the young people and their parents. Overall, while there was clear evidence of transition planning in the 'induction' category, there were also significant limitations when the quality of transition visits and transition plans was unreliable. There were also significant omissions not least in the abdication of institutional responsibility over the summer break.

Transition as Development

While there was some acknowledgement of specific challenges for individuals in their transition plans, analysis of the data suggested that education providers expected the young people to develop a college identity much like other students of the same age. These expectations were starkly exemplified by young people's experiences of 'travel training', and in assumptions about successfully managing part-time timetables and being as independent from their parents or teachers as their peers. Basic independence markers – such as how to catch the bus, go shopping or participate in leisure clubs - had all been compromised by not having a peer group and limited access to social lives.

While attending special schools, the young people also had a history of being taken to school via organised, state-funded transport and for some this continued when they went to college. In other cases, pressures for travel training – designed to facilitate independent, parent-funded travel from school to college – could be seen as arising from an economic imperative to reduce transport costs, rather than necessarily emerging from the individual's need to develop their independence. David's transition plan clearly identified travel support needs, as follows:

David is not an independent traveller and will require transport to take him to and from college. David has some anxiety linked to using public transport and with busy situations. Physically David does tire and he cannot walk long distances (David's transition plan).

Nevertheless, David was accelerated into travel training despite his mother's concerns and tentative acceptance of his success:

He's passed that and that's OK, that's good and I think that's a tick-box in the way of like you're safe enough to get on the bus by yourself I think (David's mother, post-transition).

In contrast, Eric was described by his mother as having little sense of danger; she noted that he would walk out into the road oblivious to other cars, and he was deemed by the college tutor to require constant one-to-one supervision throughout the day:

He's not even allowed to be unsupervised at breaks (Eric's College Tutor).

Nonetheless, the college considered him ready for travel training, and his mother described a very hostile response when she raised concerns:

He [the college travel trainer] shouted at me. He said parents like you don't want their children to grow up and have independence. Don't you want him to have a girlfriend and have a job? Don't you want him to have a normal life? I

said do you want my son in a coffin? I said his death will be on your shoulders.

I said I'm his mother, it's my responsibility to keep him safe (Eric's mother, post-transition).

Eric's mother felt her concerns were dismissed by the travel trainer as over-protectiveness, despite her having previously voiced support for efforts to promote his progress towards independence. Her experience highlights a failure to acknowledge the more varied and complex trajectories of young people towards independence, and a wider need to recognise an alternative *interdependent* state in which adjustments are made to support independence that acknowledge their autism.

Most FE colleges in England operate 'full time courses' at around 16 hours or three and a half days a week due to funding regulations (ESFA 2018). For the parents in this research, 'full-time' courses at college had connotations of full-time schooling or even full-time work hours, and so the reality was a shock as Frankie's father indicated:

They said it's full time and then I said, great, five days a week and they said, yep, that's three days a week, eergh (Frankie's father, pre-transition).

One college tutor was aware of the challenges of the timetable, but when asked whether the college explicitly taught students to manage unstructured time said only:

We suggest that it is an opportunity to do something but that's as far as it goes

(David's college tutor).

This indicates that adjustments were not necessarily made to accommodate the distinctive capabilities and scaffold the support needs of the students, perhaps again because these were not always well understood.

The initial period at college was worrying for David's mother as there was no feedback at all from the college and David was typically uncommunicative with his family. She was concerned that she would not know if he was struggling:

How is he settling? Is he being bullied? And all these questions and no feedback from the college, so that's been a bit difficult (David's mother, post-transition).

Prior to their children starting at college, parents/carers in this study were used to receiving daily communication (typically in the form of home-school books) about their child. Used to the reassurance of that regular contact, they struggled with the lack of information from college and felt it undermined their ability to be able to support their children. One mother's frustration was clear, to the extent that she said she hardly knew what course he was on:

Maybe he's doing a skydiving course, or something [laughs] I haven't the faintest idea (David's mother, post-transition).

This light-hearted expression of concern became more serious when Jake told her that a student had hit him. She said that she had not heard anything about it from the college or indeed from Jake until some time after the incident. During his interview at college Jake did talk about friendship difficulties: 'Um, I've had a few problems, a few break ups'. This experience is consistent with the claim made by Hebron and Humphrey (2014) that autistic students are socially vulnerable, especially at times of transition.

Conceptualising transition as *development* focuses on the trajectory of young people as they progress towards adulthood. The data presented here show that normative expectations around that developmental process may be particularly problematic for autistic students because of challenges in managing time, social interaction and having

higher parental dependency than their peers. The institutions in the study appeared to lack capacity to make adaptations and show double empathy when it came to travel training, supporting time management and recognising the essential *interdependence* of autistic students with their parents or carers. These findings correspond to a narrow interpretation of transition, linked to a limited time period and an undifferentiated view of personal development.

Transition as Becoming

For young people in the study, there appeared to be a complicated balance between their academic and social abilities, which could have direct impact on progress at college. The *becoming* category of transition is relevant here, in offering a broader conceptual approach to transition as an on-going and evolving concept (Gale and Parker 2014). Combining this framing with a social model lens enables a focus on flexible systems and adaptive environments as well as an openness to differently abled learners. For example, Jake was qualified to progress to the next academic level at college, but along with his parents and teachers chose to take up a lower level course so that he could be supported socially. His college learning support tutor explained:

This department is just that little bit more protective...it's about his socialisation, that's still a little bit problematic ... he's not always um...entirely appropriate with his peers (Jake's college tutor)

These comments once again suggest a medical model approach, not only implying that social interaction difficulties associated with autism are Jake's problem ('*his* socialisation') but also that there is an assumption about what being 'appropriate' with peers might be. By conceptualising the first year at college as a transition year in which Jake would be protected, his opportunities for academic progress was compromised,

with Jake himself commenting that he found the college work ‘...easier because it’s lower quality...(Jake at college). Similarly, David was not permitted to continue with Maths at college despite having passed his GCSE, and he could not make sense of this:

Like the thing I want to do is Maths which I can't do and then I've got English which I struggle to do and I've still got to do (David at college).

Both Jake’s and David’s experiences reveal the inflexibility of college systems and a restricted view of academic progress. In addition, as there are many young students in colleges in England who struggle with Maths and have to re-sit examinations David’s ability could also perhaps have been harnessed to support other students in Maths lessons for mutual benefit, capitalising on an opportunity to practise ‘double empathy’ (Milton, 2012).

Beth’s experience contrasted with Jake’s as she did progress to the next academic level course at college, for which she was well qualified. However, this meant she was in the ‘mainstream’ of college alongside neurotypical learners, and she said she struggled to make sense of the social groupings in her class,

It's mostly the social and friends side of things which I'm finding really hard. I keep trying to talk to people but everyone's always in groups and I often feel that they're leaving me out and then I get really worried that I've said something wrong. I feel a bit sad that there's no one like at [my school] in my class (Beth at college).

Beth left college during the second term – her mother saying this was in part because she was unable to access the social support that she needed to interact positively with her peer group, this having not been part of her transition planning.

The impact of a lack of preparation for social transition was profound for all young people in the study. Without exception, their parents/carers reported incidents of bullying and restricted social lives. Yet all of the students had included ‘making new friends’ as a high priority in the card sort activity, when asked in the first interview what they were looking forward to at college. In his second interview, Frankie reported being forced to smoke by another college student who had said: ‘if you don’t smoke I’m going to whip you with this whip’ and in his walking interview at college Frankie described when he had seen boys whipping each other,

Like this one time, there was actually a whip fight where they had a horse whip and they started whipping each other... it was just stupid and I think one of them started bleeding (Frankie, walking interview at college).

His college tutor reported another occasion on which Frankie had also been bullied:

They took a board rubber covered in black and just blacked Frankie up, just completely blacked him but that’s an incident I caught myself (Frankie’s college tutor).

These findings are consistent with earlier research by Bauminger and Kasari (2000) and Hebron and Humphrey (2014) that identifies the vulnerability of autistic students to bullying and victimisation. The data presented here goes further in highlighting a critical need for transition processes that address the interconnections between autistic young people’s social and academic experiences.

Understanding transition as *becoming* allows for a deeper understanding of individual students and their social, emotional and academic needs in order that broader structural changes can be made. The social needs of the six students were not sufficiently attended to in the transition process and this had an impact on their progress at college

and inhibited their potential *becomings*. Jake, David and Beth would all have benefited from a more individualised curriculum that better addressed them as learners and social actors, recognised their strengths and difficulties. Acknowledging this lived reality of autistic students and understanding of the impact of the social and educational environment on their anxiety the research suggests, like Bellini (2006), that the provision of social support at times of transition is fundamental for autistic students.

Conclusion: moving beyond tick-box transitions?

The research highlights the importance of attending to the diversity and complexity of young people's experiences of transition from special to further education at age 16. Connecting the social model of disability with Gale and Parker's (2014) typology of student transition offers new insights into the realities and limitations of these experiences. The research further demonstrates why the locus of attention must shift towards educational institutions and their adaptations for autistic students rather than locating the 'problem' within the student. Transitions to further education have been under-researched, compared with other ages, phases and types of transition and this study reinforces the importance of attending to what is a crucial omission.

The typologies of transition put forward by Gale and Parker illuminate different conceptual approaches to the transition planning process. Autistic students need particular attention to be paid to their challenges in navigating change and this encompasses addressing *induction* more explicitly, including for example, how to manage non-timetabled time in the day and how to organise more meaningful preparatory visits to colleges. In relation to the *development* category, it is clear that more account needs to be taken of varying trajectories towards independence but that

there also needs to be greater acknowledgement of the need for continuing support for interdependent relationships. The research also supports the need for a deeper understanding of transition as a multi-faceted social, emotional and academic process of *becoming*, in which the diverse needs and preferences of autistic students are made apparent. This in turn illuminates what is required of *institutions*, rather than students. It also more adequately informs the *induction* and *development* categories where the specific needs of autistic students can be addressed. In addition, as this research shows conceptualising transition solely as *induction* and/or *development* is particularly problematic for young people with autism because ‘tick-box’ transition planning processes can impose normative expectations and leave critical gaps in support unidentified and unaddressed, with the summer holidays and support for social transition being particular examples of this.

Previous studies have shown that transition is problematic for many students, not just those with autism and intellectual disabilities (e.g. Evangelou et al. 2008; Humphrey and Ainscow 2006; Zeedyk et al. 2003). Many of the adjustments suggested by the research could benefit *all* students as part of promoting an inclusive environment. The definition of transition as the ‘*capability to navigate change*’ (Gale and Parker 2014, 737) is of particular significance given that autistic students may experience distinctive challenges in navigating even small changes in their everyday lives, let alone major life changes such as the move to college. In line with a social model of disability, the research demonstrates the responsibilities of educational institutions to make environmental adaptations that encompass not only the structural barriers reflected in ‘tick-box’ approaches to transition but also question what capabilities *institutions* have,

or need to develop, in order to enable students to navigate change in ways that ensure that all students can thrive.

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